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FOOD

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“Cookies are easy to make, but not easy to make great,” says pastry chef and “cookie snob” Tiffany MacIsaac. E3

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There's a 'cookie snob' in the kitchen

BY JANE BLACK

It's not polite to cheer when someone is in a panic. But the cooks at Birch & Barley, the new beer-themed restaurant on 14th Street NW, can't help it when Tiffany MacIsaac races with a hot pan of cookies into the walk-in refrigerator. Cooling the cookies quickly is the pastry chef's attempt to save them if they've been baked a moment too long. If MacIsaac deems the cookies overdone, she will not serve them to guests and they become snacks for the staff.

MacIsaac is, by her own admission, a “cookie snob.” An extra minute or two in the oven, in her opinion, can spell ruin. If cookies are no longer warm — any more than 10 minutes out of the oven — MacIsaac just isn't interested.

Pastry chefs are renowned perfectionists. MacIsaac, 28, fits that description. It's not only the elaborate desserts that consume her, but cookies, too. “Cookies are easy to make, but they're not easy to make great,” she said. “People at home read a recipe and it says eight to 10 minutes. But it could be eight; it could be five. There are so many factors, and every oven is different.”

MacIsaac, a bright-eyed blonde with a bubbly laugh, didn't always aspire to cook. In Maui, where she grew up, her family rarely cooked or sat down to dinner together. At 15, she moved to New York and landed a job as a hostess at Michael's, a midtown media power-lunch spot. For fun, she spent a few days in the kitchen and, there, found her passion. Soon after, she enrolled in culinary school.

After graduating, MacIsaac made the rounds of New York's elite restaurants. At each, she tried to master one type of dessert: ice cream, cakes, breads. It was at Union Square Cafe, her first job, that she tackled cookies. “That's where the snobbery began,” MacIsaac said. The cafe's pastry chef at the time was Deborah Snyder. “I had never worked for anyone or met anybody who was so particular about cookies,” MacIsaac said. “I realized then



DAYNA SMITH FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Pastry chefs are known perfectionists, and Tiffany MacIsaac of Birch & Barley is no exception.

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how much went into them.”

In July, MacIsaac and her fiancé, chef Kyle Bailey, were getting ready to leave for their wedding in Hawaii. They had left jobs at Lower East Side restaurant Allen & Delancey but had not decided what to do next. About a week before the wedding, they got a phone call from someone they had never heard of: Michael Babin, chief executive of Washington's Neighborhood Restaurant Group. Babin was looking for a chef for Birch & Barley. There was just one catch: The chef would need to start almost immediately.

With fewer than 100 hours to go before their flight, MacIsaac and Bailey decided to audition together. They headed to a 24-hour grocery store, then went home and cooked all night. On little sleep, they drove to Washington. There, preparation for their tasting only got harder. The kitchen at Alexandria's Evening Star Cafe, where they were set to cook, lost power, and the two were forced to move to another location. But that kitchen had no ice cream maker, and MacIsaac had prepared the

bases for five flavors. So Babin called an independent gelato store nearby and asked if she could use the store's equipment.

“It was insane,” said Babin, who said he originally hadn't intended to hire a pastry chef. “When you have an opportunity to bring someone like Tiffany on, you don't think about it for more than a second. It's an easy choice.”

Babin called to offer MacIsaac and Bailey the jobs just before they boarded their flight. The weary couple accepted, then headed for Hawaii to begin another round of cooking, this time for the wedding. Instead of a cake, MacIsaac baked cookies.

Birch & Barley has an elegant yet homey vibe that fits MacIsaac's vision for dessert. She likes to remind diners of childhood with elevated versions of sweets such as Hostess cupcakes and pudding pops that have layers of flavor the originals lack. Case in point: Her French toast dessert is designed to mimic the experience of the crunchy, buttery, soft-all-at-once French toast sticks from Burger King she ate as a kid. But MacIsaac makes hers with brioche moistened in a rich batter, then deep-fried in clarified butter. The dessert is served with caramelized banana, homemade oatmeal ice cream, bacon-infused caramel and pecan granola.

And then there are cookies. MacIsaac turns out ginger molasses, chocolate shortbread and chocolate chip cookies, plus graham crackers. Some are made just to be ground up as a garnish for ice cream.

Soon, MacIsaac hopes to launch a late-night cookie bake. Just before the restaurant kitchen closes, she will make about 60 cookies that servers will sell for \$1 apiece in the upstairs bar, ChurchKey.

“Think about it. You've been drinking and you're thinking, ‘Wow, I wish I had a snack,’” she said. “And then the smell of warm cookies wafts through the room. Wouldn't that be awesome?”

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